

id: 193467
date: 2/24/2009 7:14
refid: 09RIYADH346
origin: Embassy Riyadh
classification: CONFIDENTIAL
destination: 08JEDDAH415|09RIYADH270|09RIYADH42
header:
VZCZCXRO0566
OO RUEHBC RUEHDBU RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHKUK RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV
DE RUEHRH #0346/01 0550714
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 240714Z FEB 09 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0242
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNISL/ISLAMIC COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0054

----- header ends -----

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 000346

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT PLEASE PASS TO NEA/ARP WROEBUCK AND NEA/ARP
JHARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/22/2019
TAGS: KIRF, KISL, PGOV, PHUM, SA
SUBJECT: SAUDI SHIA CLASH WITH POLICE IN MEDINA

REF: A. A) RIYADH 270 B) RIYADH 42
B. C) 08 JEDDAH 00415

RIYADH 00000346 001.3 OF 002

Classified By: Political Counselor Lisa M. Carle
reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

1. KEY POINTS

-- (U) Saudi security forces clashed February 20 with between 500 and 2000 Saudi Shi'a pilgrims in Medina after Saudi police denied the pilgrims access to Baqi'a cemetery opposite the Prophet's Mosque.

-- (U) Shi'a unhappiness escalated into a confrontation resulting in several arrests and the use of water cannon by security forces to disperse the crowd.

-- (C) Saudi authorities apparently tried to prevent Saudi media from reporting on the incident, or from identifying the protesters as Shi'a, and have acted to defuse a larger reaction among the Shi'a community in the country's eastern

province.

-- (C) Shi'a community leaders in the Eastern Province told post that the SAG approached the influential Qatifi Sheikh, Hassan al-Saffar, to request his assistance in preventing a public protest in Qatif. No protests have so far taken place in Qatif in response to the Medina incident.

2. (C) COMMENT: The Shi'a community's long-simmering anger over historical grievances (see below) occasionally boils over in such demonstrations (reftels). Trusted members of the small Shi'a minority in Jeddah recently reported to post that resentment and discrimination against their community is on the up-tick, indicating that the Shi'a are vulnerable even in the usually more tolerant Hijaz (ref C). However, the anger is unlikely to result in protests that the Saudi security forces cannot contain. Efforts by Saudi authorities to play down the incident in the press and head off demonstrations in Shi'a communities appear to have calmed the situation for now. Nevertheless, respected Shi'a community leaders have publicly and privately conveyed their growing impatience with perceived religious persecution by the SAG in the aftermath of the Baqi'a incident.

3. (C) BACKGROUND: The ancient Baqi'a cemetery, located next to the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, is the final resting place of many important figures from the early days of Islam, including relatives and Companions of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, the 3rd Caliph Uthman, and Hasan bin Ali and several other early Shi'a Imams. The Shi'a venerate these graves, and hold a historical grudge against the Al Saud for the destruction of the tombs that occurred when King Abdalaziz conquered Medina in 1925. The King and his zealous followers, the Ikhwan, considered grave markings idolatrous and destroyed many such tombs throughout the country. Shi'a throughout the world still mourn this destruction and refer it as a "Day of Sorrow." The cemetery is still used for burials.

4. (U) WHAT HAPPENED (REPORTED VERSION): A Medina police spokesman gave the following description of events to the Arabic daily Al-Watan: "At Friday evening, and after the end of Baqi'a graveyard visiting hours, a group of visitors gathered in front of the graveyard asking for permission to go inside. The security guards told them that the graveyard is closed. That led to a huge mess in the place including the raising of voices and shouting." Al-Watan added that the Shi'a blocked the entrance to the Prophet's Mosque, inhibiting evening prayers, and that five "visitors" were arrested, which allowed others to enter the mosque for prayers. Other newspapers reported "emergency security forces" formed a "human shield" to stop the protesters from clashing with the religious police, but that after protesters began throwing shoes and cans at them, the security forces moved to disperse the crowd. Four children were reported trapped in the incident and hospitalized for minor injuries.

5. (C) WHAT HAPPENED (SHI'A VERSION): An Eastern Province contact told Dhahran PolOff the confrontation began at 5:00 PM and lasted three hours. Following closure of the graveyard, the Shi'a, many of whom were women, stood outside considering the refusal to let them enter as an insult. Saudi security officers then elbowed their way through the women, which resulted in a scuffle and caused some of the women to "lose some of their coverings." At this time, a security official climbed a wall to videotape the women, at

RIYADH 00000346 002 OF 002

which point the women began throwing shoes at the officer. Then, security forces began "waving their batons at the protesters, thereby prompting the women to stand up and confront them using their fists and by shouting denunciations and calls for divine interventions." After an hour and a half of shouting, the security forces used water cannon (and according to one source tear gas) to disperse the women, and then arrested two women and one man, all Shi'a from Qatif in the Eastern Province.

6. (U) A video of the incident available February 23 on the website www.Shi'atube.net showed a man, who from his appearance could have been an agent of the religious police, standing above the cemetery gate dodging shoes and filming the restive crowd below.

7. (U) NOTHING TO REPORT HERE, FOLKS: On February 21, the private Saudi organization "Human Rights Watch in Saudi Arabia" circulated a message via Facebook alleging that Interior Minister Prince Nayif sent a "note" February 20 to the editors of Saudi newspapers and internet sites forbidding them to write about the incident. The Arabic language press reported the story February 21 and 22, but without identifying the protesters as Shi'a. Newspapers on February 23 carried no mention of the Baqi'a events. Saudi Arabia's English daily newspapers, which are targeted at the business and diplomatic communities, have not carried any coverage of this story. The head of the religious police in Medina has publicly denied his organization was involved.

8. (C) STAMPING OUT THE SPARKS: The blog Moltaqaa reported on February 21 that Shi'a leaders in Qatif were planning a "peaceful demonstration" to protest the Baqi'a incident, but subsequent reports indicate this demonstration did not take place, and that the Qatif police called community leaders and the Governor of Qatif to help stop the demonstration. The blog Al-Weam.com claimed on February 22 that Shi'a leaders were planning protests in both Qatif and Safwa, and that the Interior Ministry had allowed them to take place, but post has no reports that any demonstrations actually occurred. XXXXXXXXXXXX (strictly protect), a highly respected Shi'a community leader in the Eastern Province, told Dhahran PolOff there would be protests in response to the Medina

incident on February 22 at 3:00 PM. He said authorities had approached the influential Shi'a Sheikh Hassan Al-Saffar to try to prevent any protests. However, XXXXXXXXXXXXX said the Shi'a in Qatif, and elsewhere in Saudi Arabia, remain very upset about the incident in Medina.

9. (U) SAUDI BLOGS TAKE UP THE ARGUMENT: Blogs are debating the cause of the altercation. Conservative Sunni sites al-Saha.com, al-Weam.com, and Sabq.org supported the security forces' actions against the Shi'a as "just" because of the Shi'a's "religious and legal violations." The Shi'a website Rasid.com called the incident another example of "Saudi government persecution against the Shi'a." Rasid claimed that the government has always opposed Shi'a rituals at sites such as Baqi'a, which the Salafi Sunni establishment considers to be blasphemous idolatry. But intolerance runs both ways - Rasid also recalled an episode in Baqi'a cemetery three years ago involving a Shi'a man who apparently relieved himself on the grave of Uthman, the third Islamic Caliph (AD 644-656), who is despised by Shi'a as a usurper. This defilement outraged the religious police and contributed to tension between Shi'a worshippers and those who protect the Baqi'a sites.

10. (U) This is a coordinated message from Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dhahran.

FRAKER
FRAKER

=====CABLE ENDS=====